



# Gender questions in informal sector of West Bengal: a case study

Sayati Ghosh

Research Scholar, Centre for Knowledge Ideas and Development Studies, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Correspondence Author: Sayati Ghosh

Received 1 Feb 2023; Accepted 12 Apr 2023; Published 17 Apr 2023

## Abstract

The study wishes to focus on the various questions of gender in the informal sectors of West Bengal. I chose Pingla Naya village of Paschim Medinipur for its eminent scroll painters. Scroll painting is a female-dominated art-form. I conduct a field study and form a questionnaire that attempts to answer the questions related to autonomy and entrepreneurship of women to find whether autonomy is encompassing. The relative autonomy index of women is satisfyingly high. Surprisingly, the women with such a high relative autonomy index have very low willingness for entrepreneurship. Though women were initially self-employed, male entrepreneurs are coming into the limelight after this informal art form got recognized as a micro scale industry in 2016.

**Keywords:** relative autonomy index, putting out, comparative advantage, entrepreneurship, restriction, hypotheses

## Introduction

Scroll painting is one of the most traditional and encompassing art forms of West Bengal. It depicts the anecdotes of Hindu deities accompanied with folk songs. It was an informal industry before it got recognized as a Micro Scale industry by the Government of West Bengal in 2016. Unlike most of the contemporary performing arts which are mostly male dominated, this art form is female-dominated. The study will cite some reasons behind this anomaly. The paper wishes to focus on the various gender questions like autonomy and entrepreneurship of women.

A woman is said to enjoy autonomy when she has the capacity and conditions to make decisions impacting her life. Autonomy is often equated to financial independence, which is rarely the case. Financial independence is necessary but not sufficient for autonomy. There have been instances where financially independent women lacked the decision-making capacity in their family. Food allocation between men and women in the family is one such determinant of decision making. To measure autonomy, the paper finds out the relative autonomy index of the women of this village. The relative autonomy index takes into account the introjected regulation (how the woman carries forward a norm subconsciously), intrinsic regulation (how one restricts herself against a particular action), external regulation (how the ambience around the woman impacts and restricts her decisions) and lastly identified regulation (how the woman sees the larger cause behind their action).

Entrepreneurship defines the capacity of an agent to control the different factors of production with a profit seeking goal. From the data collected, we find that there are some male entrepreneurs in this village. They are expanding contacts in the towns and are bringing in hefty orders to this village turned production hub. They provide the women with the materials for artwork and pay them an estimate of their labor as their salary. Interviewing the women, it was clear that these women either lacked the know-how or the will to build the contacts.

## Literature review and research framework

Gender economics is a comparatively new topic. The MAGNET (2021) guidelines published by the World Bank provides us with the simple yet unique idea that an adequate modeling of the food-water allocation to female members in a household will throw light on women's autonomy.

The EMERGE (health repository for gender equality) provides the response options and the methodology for calculating the Relative Autonomy Index.

The consumption expenditure per capita (CEPC) from the NSSO reports (round 66, 2009-10) <sup>[2]</sup> show that women-headed households allocate more resources to education, food compared to male headed households.

Caraka and Meno (2021) <sup>[1]</sup> defines precisely the four types of motivation- the identified, the external, the intrinsic and the introjected and the effectiveness of relative autonomy index. Relative autonomy index measures self-determination.

Mies (1984) <sup>[3]</sup> shows that industries where women have a direct participation in the production process have more decision making capacity in the family.

The village witnesses women of all age groups painting scrolls, teapots. There were many interesting observations that may conform to this high relative autonomy index. The responses of the women were the same in the presence and absence of the male members of their family. While I was speaking to one of the women scroll painters, I could see her husband boiling the rice in the pot. In another household, the artist's husband gladly made tea for me while I was interviewing her. Even in cities, we see that the working woman has to complete all household chores right after returning from work.

Based on the observations, the hypothesis of the study is, women with direct participation in production enjoy high autonomy and that autonomy is encompassing, i.e the women asserts her high autonomy in all fields of her life.

## Objective

The objective of the study is-

- To find the pattern of Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) in the women who practice a female-dominated art because the study wishes to confirm whether financial independence begets decision making power in the family.
- To understand the entrepreneurial capacity and willingness of the women and the constraints to it and thus the encompassing nature of the autonomy.

**Data and methodology**

**Data**

The field survey was conducted on 10 families out of 100 families of scroll painters of Naya village of Pingla block in Paschim Medinipur district. It was a primary data collection through a field survey to get genuine and first hand data. The reason behind choosing this particular village was that it comprised the artists who practiced a female-dominated art form.

**Methodology**

A detailed questionnaire was formed on the aspects of autonomy of women. The MAGNET guideline provides food and water allocation to be a major determinant of autonomy of women. The questions were designed according to the four main regulations - intrinsic regulation, external regulation, identified regulation and introjected regulation.

They were initially asked which food they considered to be the most nutritious. Then they were asked whether they faced any discrimination on consuming that food(external regulation), whether they restricted themselves from having the most nutritious food at home(intrinsic regulation), whether they thought that allocating better food to the male members of their family, who supposedly worked in fields or other wage-paying sectors would increase their productivity and in turn the family income(identified regulation) and lastly how ingrained the idea of allocating the better food to the male member to the family was among the women. For this, the elderly and the young women of the family were questioned separately (introjected regulation) because it is the elderly women in the family who teach the younger girls about such norms.

All the answers were classified into strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree with scores -4,-3,- 2, -1 were attached respectively to them. Here the introjected is taken as the mean score of the mother-daughter pair or mother-in-law and daughter-in law pairs of the families. Autonomy refers to the removal of restrictions. So, regulation can be treated as the negative of autonomy, just as we treat loss to be negative profit. Thus, the negative scores have been taken. The formula of the relative autonomy index (RAI) is given by

$$RAI = (2 * InR + IdR) - (2 * ExR + IjR)$$

Where,

InR=Intrinsic Regulation,

IdR=Identified Regulation,

ExR=External Regulation,

IjR=Introjected Regulation and

RAI=Relative Autonomy Index

Next, both men and women were asked whether they have a business card. The business card indicates willingness for

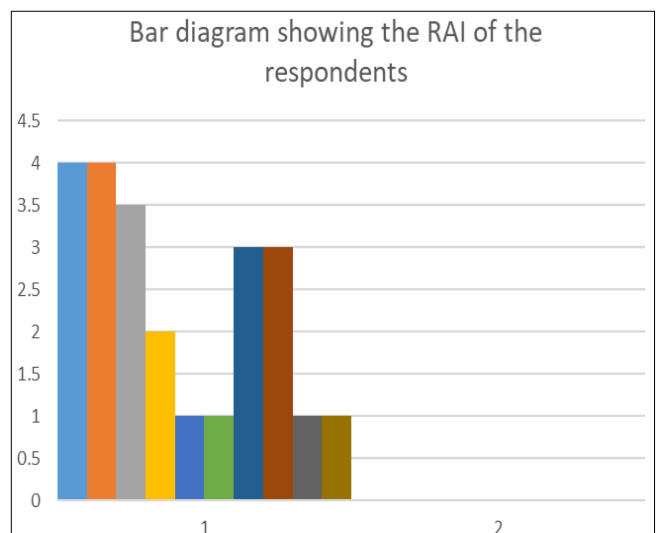
entrepreneurship, since the business card contains the contact details and special skills of the artisans which they give the visitors for potential orders. We will check the distribution of such business cards among men and women.

**Results**

The responses of the 10 families are documented below. The relative autonomy index ranges from -9 to +9. We will represent diagrammatically the relative autonomy indices of the chosen families.

**Table 1:** Table showing the score distribution of the four determinants of Relative autonomy index and the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) of the respondents

SL no	External	Intrinsic	Identified	Introjected	RAI
1	-4	-2	-3	-2	4
2	-4	-2	-2	-2	4
3	-4	-2	-2	-1.5	3.5
4	-3	-3	-1	-3	2
5	-3	-2	-3	-2	1
6	-1	-1	-1	-2	1
7	-3	-2	-1	-2	3
8	-2	-1	-2	-3	3
9	-2	-2	-1	-2	1
10	-4	-3	-4	-3	1



**Fig 1:** Bar Chart showing the Relative Autonomy Index in the Village

Though the figure does not show any definite pattern, the relative autonomy index is satisfyingly high.

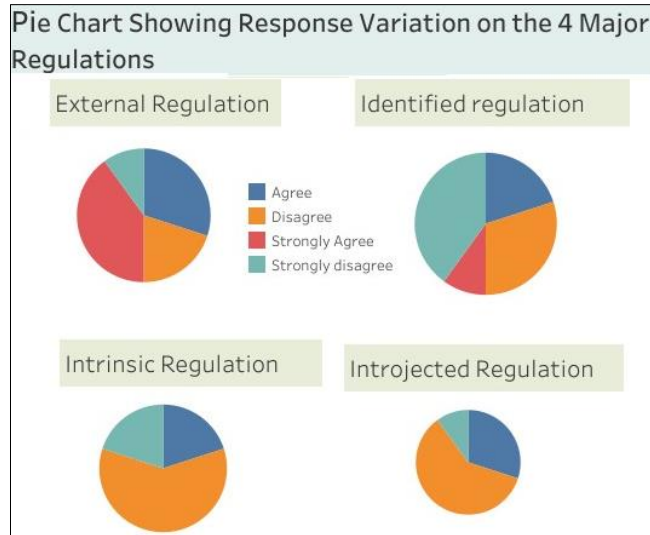
To understand which of the regulations dominate the decisions, we construct a 4x4 matrix with the frequency of the regulations and the responses as shown in the figure below. The values in the figure are expressed in percentage.

	External	Intrinsic	Identified	Introjected
Strongly Agree	40	0	10	0
Agree	30	20	20	30
Disagree	20	60	30	60
Strongly disagree	10	20	40	10

**Fig 2:** Matrix showing percentage values of responses to different regulations

Here, (external, strongly agree) =40, means that 40% of the

respondents strongly agree that external regulation had a major role in their decision of allocating the better food to the male member of their family. Most respondents disagreed with the existence of introjected and intrinsic regulation. We find external regulation to be one of the strongest reasons behind women allocating the better food to the male member of the family. The following pie chart depicts how the response varies for the different determinant regulations.



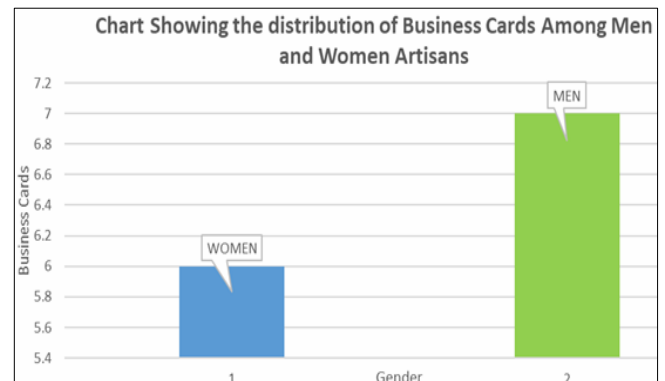
**Fig 3:** Pie chart showing response variation on the 4 major regulations

We shall try to focus on the entrepreneurial willingness and capacity of these women with such a high relative autonomy index since controlling the means of production is yet another form of autonomy. The extensive interview reveals that a male scroll painter, Raju Chitrakar (name changed), has emerged into an entrepreneur of the scrolls and the related products. This mainly happened since he gained customer faith through completing all the difficult projects assigned to him. This artist brings orders of the required products and works in a team consisting mainly of women. He provides them with the raw materials and an estimated cost of their labour to produce a unit. This is the putting out system. The women of this village have participated more in the direct production.

Women conducted workshops both in online and offline mode, where they tried to spread awareness against various social evils like vaccine hesitancy, child marriage, dowry, illiteracy and so on. Previously artists irrespective of gender, did not have a market to sell their products. The non-producing intermediaries sold their scrolls at exorbitant prices, after buying them at a cheap rate from the artists, maintaining a high profit margin. The scroll artists of this village have to depend on these brokers since the brokers are at least finding a market for their products.

All the women possess a bank account. But they are not accustomed to the procedures of banking. Irrespective of gender, the elderly depend on the younger ones in the family regarding the banking procedures because the younger ones are educated. A notable observation is that the second generation of these artists are attending primary school. One of the children, Arshi Chitrakar (name changed), who currently studies in class 2, led me to their place and showed her mother's artworks. She gladly accepted that she paints as well and she

wanted me to buy one of the cards she made. An entrepreneur is defined as a person who decides to control the process of production with a motive of earning profit. However, the women were happy if they could recoup the production cost only. They did not have any motive of earning profit. Rupali Chitrakar (name changed) says that they are inspired to produce four scroll paintings when one of their scrolls is sold, even if sufficient inventory is present. Rupali is a well-known artist whose scroll painting on the corona virus became viral during the pandemic. She was even invited in foreign workshops on Patachitra. She became so popular that the audience wanted her solo performance. She tells them that her performance would be enhanced if her team accompanied her. But she refuses to identify herself as an entrepreneur though she possesses the ability and resources to conduct a show all by herself. This is where she differs from her male counterpart Raju who brings orders and builds contacts beyond the village and considers himself as someone who would generate employment for his fellow artisans in future. Maybe the women attach equal valuation to their art and other household chores. To get a clear picture of the willingness of entrepreneurship, the following figure depicts the distribution of business cards among women and men artisans of the village.



**Fig 4:** Chart showing the distribution of business cards among men and women artisans

The results of the figure conform to the interviews that women have lower willingness for entrepreneurship than men.

All women artisans are part of self-help groups. Currently, the scroll painters have practiced product diversification. Along with art papers, the women design the same anecdotes on T-shirts, clothes and tea pots to reach a wider range of audience. It is more convenient to repay the loans when the entire group applies for the loan. All the members of the team are not equally deft in all paintings. For example, Rupali is an expert in painting on the art paper while her sister in law is expert in painting on the tea pots. Each member practices the kind of painting she excels in; so that they can sell their respective products and repay the loans within the stipulated time. Thus, we can conclude, these women in the group work in terms of comparative advantage. Comparative advantage refers to the ability of an artist to complete one type of product more efficiently than the other artists. For example, an artist who paints 4 canvases in an hour is more efficient than an artist who will complete the same 4 canvases in 2 hours. While working for an hour, the person loses the wage she could earn from an alternative occupation during that time. But if she works for two hours with the same outcome, she is losing a higher amount

that she could have earned from the alternative occupation. Thus, the lady who paints 4 scrolls in 1 hour has a comparative advantage in scroll painting than the other woman who takes two hours to complete the same 4 scrolls. It is the duty of women to get orders of their respective products, fulfill them, sell those products and subsequently repay their loans in the given time.

The interview clarified that the women were just happy participating in the direct production process. They had little or perhaps no willingness to be an entrepreneur like their male counterparts. However, the number of established male entrepreneurs is one. But, when the male members were interviewed, it was found that they were more aware about the market and prospects of the scroll paintings.

From the analysis, we find that women's autonomy in this limited social space is not encompassing since despite a high relative autonomy index, they have low willingness for entrepreneurship and thus it disproves the hypothesis of the study.

### Discussion

Why such high RAI in this village? Is there any economic explanation behind this deviation? In most of these households, women were the main breadwinner. From extracting colours from natural resources to painting the scrolls, women are an integral part of this art form. Three decades ago, men and women equally participated in this art form. Recently, this art form is being dominated by women since the men have alternative employment like contract farming, owning small shops to sustain themselves. Women utilize the ample leisure time after completing household chores in practicing this traditional art form. The existing problem of a limited market exacerbated during the pandemic. The interviewer could be a prospect of a new market for such a family and consequently all the artists. If the small market for their products expands, it would be collectively beneficial for the family and consequently the art form.

The difference between the paid and unpaid labour is so ingrained, that even the children recognise painting the scroll as work and not the household chores. When a lady is carrying out household chores, the children say that their mother is cooking or washing clothes but when the lady is painting, the children say that their mother is "working".

Unfortunately, the women did not wish to furnish details about their internal agreements within the self-help group. It might happen that one of the women who has a comparative advantage in painting on T-shirts gets a bulky order of tea-pots. She might put out this order to any member of her self-help group who is deft in teapot painting.

Some probable reasons behind the low entrepreneurial willingness can be lack of know-how about digital marketing and travelling restriction. The travelling restriction might be intrinsic (women might not feel comfortable in travelling) or external (lack of transport or poorly developed roads).

### Conclusions and future directions

The study wishes to answer questions on gender equality in a community of female-dominated art forms, "Patachitra" of West Bengal. Measuring autonomy is a comparatively new concept in gender economics. The relative autonomy index of the village is high, though it does not show any specific pattern.

[www.dzarc.com/social](http://www.dzarc.com/social)

The study has seen that this art includes direct participation of women in the production process. These two observations coupled, conform to Mies' research where she concluded that women have greater decision making power when they directly participate in the production process. External regulation plays a major role in women's decisions. Despite high relative autonomy index, the women have a low entrepreneurial willingness. However, a clear evidence that the women actually assert their autonomy could be found from future research. Perhaps, patriarchy might be so deeply ingrained in these women, that these regulations are not identified as regulations, but are traditions. Thus, gender sensitisation is needed from the grass root level.

The study of economics assumes rationality of the economic agents, which is not true in real life. The reasons and the anodyne of the irrational actions can be provided by policy designing. There is an emerging export market for such traditional handicrafts, but this information is not reaching the artisans located in the nadir of the economic hierarchy. What I found was, the passion of women for their art could not be explained in terms of economics.

The women could be interviewed more regarding the constraints they would be facing if they chose to be an entrepreneur. Perhaps the women needed awareness about the foreign exchange value of their products and how earning profits would be beneficial for them. Though most of them have business cards, the study cannot reveal whether it was their own idea to make a card for themselves. There could be future research about whether travel restriction or lack of know-how about digital resources was an impediment for entrepreneurship in women. The nature of the travel restriction should also be taken into account and consequently relevant policies can be built. If the restriction was intrinsic, the success stories of women of similar professions who travelled could be shared in order to break their stigma. If the restriction was external, the investment in the access infrastructure like roads, transport should be increased. Nonetheless the question still remains whether the quality of the art will remain the same if the artists are more aware of the profitability of their art form. Will the kids like Arshi grow up and be aware of the entrepreneurial prospect of her art and its artists? If not, what other than formal education can make the women aware of their own entrepreneurial capacity?

### Limitations of the study

Some respondents could not strongly agree or were not comfortable in answering some questions. Thus, there is nonresponse bias. Thus the "Strongly Agree" option does not exist for some of the regulations. Due to paucity of data, a definite relationship could not be displayed between high relative autonomy index and low entrepreneurial willingness among women. Also, the subjects could not answer questions related to travel restrictions and other access infrastructure.

### References

1. Carka M, Mano R. Self-Determination Factors and Their Impact Through the Relative Autonomy Index on Skills-Based Learning, 2021. (<https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2021-0084>).
2. Level and Consumption Pattern of Household Consumption Expenditure of National Sample Survey

- Organization, 2009-2010, round 66.
3. Mies M, Lalitha K, Kumari K. Indian Women in Subsistence and Agricultural Labour, World Employment Programme Research, 1984.
  4. August. Measuring Women's Goal Setting and Decision Making; Measures of Advancing Gender Equality, World Bank reports, 2021. (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/brief/measures-for-advancing-gender-equality-magnet>).
  5. Vaz A, Pratley P, Alkire S. Measuring women's autonomy in Chad using the relative autonomy index. *Feminist economics*. 2016;22(1):264-294. [https://emerge.ucsd.edu/r\\_3eeqalct8lgckbr/](https://emerge.ucsd.edu/r_3eeqalct8lgckbr/).